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**Gabriele Rosenthal**

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY OR MULTICULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY?**

Theoretical concepts of biographical constitution grounded in case reconstructions

### **1. Identity or Biography?**

Am I Czech, Hungarian, German or Jewish? What is my mother tongue? To which nation or people do I belong? Are these questions even relevant for somebody who has grown up among different cultures and whose life history means they have different possibilities of where to locate themselves? How does the course of one's life history and the biographical constellation lead to a national or ethnic sense of belonging or affiliation becoming a central theme? The life histories of Israeli Jews<sup>1</sup> originating from a multicultural area of Central and Eastern Europe who were labelled as Jewish during the period of Nazi persecution - regardless of their own self-definition - and who are now a part of a multicultural majority, are ideal for reconstructing the conditions required for developing a multicultural identity as well as a multicultural habitus (disposition). These biographers<sup>2</sup> were socialised within the conflict between auto- and hetero-stereotyping, were mainly raised bilingually, and at different points in their lives were members of a minority culture (in Europe) and a majority culture (in Israel).

But what do we mean by a multicultural or even a national identity? And are these types of identity determined by self-definition or by life experiences? As self-definition and life experiences are by no means necessarily compatible - and the current self-definition offers us no clues as to its genesis - we must ask whether the concept of identity is any use to us if we need additional constructions to overcome its static character. The point here is by no means to invalidate attempts to expand the concept with a process-oriented focus. One such attempt is undertaken by Peter Weinreich (1989:50), based on Erikson (1963) and Laing (1961); an approach "[which] emphasizes continuity rather than sameness in identity and gives central importance to the process of construal."<sup>3</sup> However, my position on the issue is that by choosing the biography concept, it is possible to avoid the problematic aspects of the identity concept and to empirically enable process-oriented analysis. In contrast to the rather rigid identity concept, the biography concept is genuinely process-oriented: "Biography is a concept which takes temporality into account. It both constitutes and processes temporality" (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995b:258). On the other hand, the identity concept focuses on the following question: what is now making up one's identity, not so much

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<sup>1</sup> The life stories narrated to the author in interviews are part of a study of Jews forced to emigrate and survivors of concentration camps. Cf. Rosenthal 1995a; Rosenthal in press.

<sup>2</sup> I prefer to use the term "Biographer" instead of the term "Autobiographer" in this context. In my opinion the latter term does not lay adequate emphasis on the social construction of life stories.

<sup>3</sup> In the German sociological discussion of identity, Lothar Krappmann's (1975) attempt to combine the identity concept of the symbolic interactionist tradition, traced primarily to G.H. Mead (1934), with E. H. Erikson's (1968) psychodynamic approach to identity is one of those which would be relevant for a discussion in terms of biographical theory.

how one became what one is. "Biography refers to an interpretatively open process of 'becoming'. Identity, on the other hand, focuses on a fixed state of 'being' or 'having' (ibid.). Biographies are composed of a series of chronological experiences and informed by the biographer's access to these experiences. Thus the central questions of a biographical analysis become: what did the biographer experience in the course of his/her life, how does he/she view these experiences in the present and what visions of the past and the future result from his/her perspective?

Apart from the numerous senses of belonging in modern societies, living conditions alter during the course of one's life. Furthermore, the sense of belonging takes on a different relevance, moving between the background and foreground, depending on social and biographical processes. The question "who am I" becomes increasingly difficult to answer. This difficulty is a result of both attribution of the self and by others. Does this then mean that autobiographies characterised by variation and changes of belonging lead to identity diffusion? Do individuals lose their sense of who they are because they can only define their belonging with difficulty? Although in some (especially bureaucratic) situations, an "unambiguous" belonging may indeed be socially demanded - e.g., in applying for German citizenship - in modern society, biographical constructions are increasingly being demanded rather than the self-construction "I am so-and-so". Individuals are presented with the task of creating continuity in their life history<sup>4</sup> by informing themselves and others of how they came to be what they are today. By telling others and themselves their life story, the discontinuities within the life history and how they came to be how they are today become understandable and plausible, for themselves as well as for others.

Due to the fact that migration biographies are increasing in Europe, the idea of belonging to a nation or a people defining "identity" for life is as much outdated by experience as the courses of migration described in the social sciences, mainly in terms of losses (cf. Breckner 1994; Lutz 1995). The analysis of biographical courses of migration processes, on the other hand, shows us how little the biographical processing of the changing living conditions leads to identity problems and/or diffusion, but rather to the formation of a multicultural course of action and a self-confidence independent of macrosocial questions of belonging. "Instead of a 'before and after' perception which treats migration as the missing link, the individual is seen as one who has lived through changes, adapted to them or not, and created strategies of resistance" (Lutz 1995:305).

Following Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal (1995b), in view of these considerations I favour the biography<sup>5</sup> as a more comprehensive concept, rather than the somewhat static and even normative identity concept. The concept of biography makes the concept of identity redundant. Biography is an empirically more productive, logically multi-relational (instead of bi-relational), and linguistically more narrative (instead of argumentative) concept. Empirical analysis of narrated life stories<sup>6</sup> allows us to reconstruct the lived-through life history of the biographer as well as to reconstruct the

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<sup>4</sup> By life history we mean the lived-through life; by life story we mean the narrated life as related in conversation or written in the present-time; cf. Rosenthal 1993; 1995b.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the major theoretical contributions to the German biographical research of Fischer-Rosenthal 1994; Kohli 1986; Rosenthal 1995b; Schütze 1984.

<sup>6</sup> On the procedure of hermeneutical case reconstruction cf. Rosenthal 1993; Rosenthal/Bar-On 1992.

biographers construction of his life, i.e., how their past appears to them today - beyond of their conscious interest of presentation - and how it makes sense of their present and future (cf. Rosenthal 1993, 1995b)<sup>7</sup>.

Self-assignment to a culture, nation or a people is constituted from biographical experiences. We are not direct "elements" of a collective which we represent, but live from the potential for experience and meaning in our own life history, which is embedded in collectives, environments and nations. Their multifaceted histories are experienced and lived through, acting in concrete biographical terms. Above all, it needs to be considered that one's own life history develops against a backdrop of the family history active over several generations. In our own lives we do not only solve current problems, but also take on family delegations from our parents' generation, and in particular from that of our grandparents (cf. Stierlin 1982). These delegations are especially effective when we are not aware of them. We are driven on by them without knowing and are often blocked by them. In my opinion, we can thus neither understand the fighting in former Yugoslavia nor the neo-Nazism among young Germans independently of the respective latent family history still in force.<sup>8</sup>

In light of these considerations, the empirical question as to the national identity of an biographer has to be rejected as an oversimplification. This question can hardly do justice to the complexity of social belonging. Rather, a sufficiently realistic insight into the social processes of self-definition and action is provided by the reconstruction of the constellation of life and family histories, in which belonging to a collective is actually a subject for the biographer, together with the discovery of the functions of identification with ethnics or nationality in relation to the life and family histories. Corresponding to an empirically founded development of theory, as required inter alia by the so-called grounded theory (cf. Glaser/Strauss 1967), in my opinion, concepts should not be developed independently of empirical analysis nor set normatively to begin with and should only be tested empirically. To concretise this further, the empirical questions raised are:

1. In which situations during life - and life always means the interaction between individual and social events - does belonging to a nation, ethnic group or a culture become a subject of importance for an individual?
2. What biographical function does self-definition have? In other words: How does self-definition help one deal with specific biographical problems, such as discontinuity?
3. To what extent does self-definition correspond to actual acting and to the history of acts and events experienced in the life of the biographer?
4. How are actions and self-definition constituted in the course of the biography?

## **2. A contrasting comparison between two case studies<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>7</sup> This biographical construct, which is not at the biographer's conscious disposal, constitutes not only the selection of experiences out of memory. It also constitutes how the biographer perceives these experiences today.

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of the Nazi past in three-generation families cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 1995, 57ff., Rosenthal 1995c.

<sup>9</sup> The following discussion of the two case studies is result-oriented, i.e. the process of interpretation cannot be reconstructed here. Therefore we would like to make the reader aware of the fact, that the analytical method applied here (Rosenthal 1993; 1995b) implies that both the construction and the examination of hypotheses takes place in each concrete case. Essential principles in this method are

I would now like to contrast the life stories of two women whose biographies are characterised by multicultural experiences but who are differentiated by their self-definitions. While one of the biographers feels part of an ethnic group, the other considers herself bonded to different nations and cultures. According to Jewish law, both women are Jewish, and both grew up bilingually in multicultural Czechoslovakia prior to 1938. Their background allows them different possibilities for locating themselves. This further complicates the question - typical for the Jewish course through life - of belonging to the Jewish people as well as of association with the culture of one's country of origin or belonging to the country and state where one lives. Both women emigrated to Israel upon their release from concentration camps and so live in a multicultural society. The State of Israel has a national individuality due to the very fact of its cultural and ethnic diversity. In contrast to their children's generation, the two women do not consider themselves primarily to be Israelis, although for forty years they have been leading a life devoted to developing Israel. From an Israeli and, in general, a Jewish point of view, these are not particularly unusual biographies.

Hannah Zweig<sup>10</sup> was born in France in the mid-1920s as the daughter of French Jews. Her father died in an accident when she was three years old. Two years later her mother married a Czech Jew, and mother and daughter emigrated to Prague. Both French and Czech were spoken at home. Hannah gained Czech citizenship and kept her French nationality. She learned German at school and the classes focused on German culture and history. As was typical for upper middle-class Jewish families, Hannah also received private tutoring in English. The family respected Jewish law, i.e., the mother ran a kosher house.

If we assume, in reference to the multicultural viewpoint of her original background, that this socialisation was not the norm, then we can ask the following questions: What did Hannah consider herself to be at this time? We can also ask whether the girl suffered from this diversity and/or whether she felt herself torn between the different cultures and did not know where she belonged.

Before going into some aspects of Mrs. Zweig's image of herself, I would like to briefly outline some further points in her life history. When Hannah was twelve, her mother died in childbirth. Hannah remained with her stepfather and later married a Belgian Jew at the age of sixteen. Following the invasion of Prague by the German army in March 1938, both her husband and her stepfather joined the Czech resistance. Both men were arrested in 1940 and Hannah heard of their fate only upon her liberation from the camps in 1945. Hannah herself was deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt in January 1942. She was imprisoned in the camp for three years and subjected to medical experiments. At the end of 1944 she was moved to Prague along with other female prisoners in order to build anti-tank weapons. Her release by the Red Army in May 1945 was an unimaginably traumatic experience: She was raped by several members of

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reconstruction and sequentiality. The texts are not subsumed under specific categories but the meaning is analysed in the context of the entire text. The sequential compilation of the text of the life story as well as the chronology of the biographical experiences in the life history play an essential role.

<sup>10</sup> All names have been changed.

the Red Army.<sup>11</sup> The Russians became her most-feared enemies and so she fled to the American zone in Germany. In the meantime she had learned that her husband and stepfather had both been murdered. She then worked for the Americans as a translator. Here she met Arie, the son of a German mother and Jewish Czech father, who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp as a so-called "mischling".<sup>12</sup> In 1948 Arie and Hannah were married. Thus, although Mrs. Zweig lived a multinational and multicultural life, she maintained a certain continuity to family tradition in her choice of a partner. In 1948, before the foundation of the State of Israel, Hannah, like her husband, became a member of the Zionist-Socialist/Marxist youth group Hashomer Hazair (cf. Reinhartz, 1986). In 1953, the couple and their two children, who had meanwhile been born in Germany, emigrated to Israel under the auspices of this group. The whole family entered a kibbutz following the socialist movement, which also means that they lived in a demonstratively anti-religious manner (e.g., pork was eaten on the Sabbath).

Mrs. Zweig has since been divorced and has left the kibbutz. As a conscientious Zionist, she moved to a small town in the Negev Desert, inhabited mainly by Oriental Jews who do not share her European cultural heritage. In her everyday life, alongside Hebrew, she speaks mainly German and English. Her circle of friends contains, among others, Jews from a German background; and Ethiopian Jews who have been living in her town for the last few years. She is also friendly with the Bedouins, and spent several months living in their tents in order to learn about their way of life.

To which culture or nation do people who have been multiculturally moulded by life history and experience feel they belong? Is this even a subject of discussion for them? Let us see what Hannah Zweig tells us about this topic. I carried out two biographical-narrative interviews in German with her to find out what she thinks.<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Zweig speaks German almost flawlessly, and the analysis of the interview showed that it is in German that she feels more closely connected to her past before her aliya to Israel. This past rarely plays a part in the family dialogues with her children<sup>14</sup> to whom she speaks Hebrew. Instead, that part of her past sometimes becomes the subject of conversations with her German-speaking friends in Israel.

During the first conversation, Hannah Zweig told me her life story up to the time directly after the war. The second interview was used to continue her story. Already in

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah speaks about 20 men.

<sup>12</sup> This information comes from an interview with Arie's sister who lives in the Czech Republic. In Arie's interview with the two Israeli researchers, Noga Gilad and Tamar Zilberman, he only hints at his non-Jewish background. In the interview with the author, Hannah, who has meanwhile been divorced from her husband, introduces him as a Jew.

<sup>13</sup> The interviewees were asked to tell their life story according to the technique of the narrative interview (cf. Schuetze 1976; Rosenthal 1995b). After the initial opening question, the ensuing story was not interrupted by further questions but was encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention, such as a slight nod or 'mhm'. In the second part of the interview - the 'period of questioning' - the interviewer initiated, with narrative questions, more elaborate narrations on topics and biographical events already mentioned and blocked-out issues were addressed.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Zweig's daughter and her son were part of a research project on three-generation-families supervised by the author (cf. Rosenthal in press; Rosenthal/Völter in press). Neither of them know much about their parents' past before the aliya.

the first conversation a close atmosphere, characterized by trust, had been created between Hannah and me. In this way Hannah was able to speak about issues that had earlier been taboo. It undoubtedly played a role here that I was a non-Jewish German conducting this interview. Sometimes it is easier for survivors to tell a German of experiences that were traumatic or which social dialogue make taboo, as in a conversation of this kind they feel released to a small extent from their sense of having to try to protect the listener from the weight of these experiences<sup>15</sup>.

Mrs. Zweig related that in the camp she had been sleeping with members of the SS and other inmates in order to earn food. Today she viewed this kind of "compulsory prostitution" as different from the acts of rape she suffered after the liberation when she had no freedom of action. She interpreted the kind of "prostitution" she had been forced into in terms of an exchange: *"And a human being who wants to survive, he simply sees it as a kind of business exchange... and they do not therefore feel themselves to be a whore."*

While her cultural sense of belonging was rarely mentioned in the first conversation - in which she related her multicultural socialisation in detail and her different emigrations (from France to Prague and later to Germany) - she began the second conversation as follows:<sup>16</sup>

*"On the one hand, I was born in France so I feel very close to French culture, and all in all, I am, my whole being tends to be rather French. You've certainly noticed I talk with my hands and feet and am pretty lively ... On the other hand, I feel very much attracted towards German and Czech culture, you know, they really attract me ... and also the languages, they also somehow attract me, and the fact that I grew up in Czechoslovakia meant I had a lot of contact to Germans, in school too, we were taught German history and German poetry, and music too, a lot of German music. We had a lot of Czech music too. I mean, I'd die for Smetana, etc. etc. but still,, no matter how much I felt, eh, French, I've always felt that I really belong to the German and the Czech culture."*

Up to this point, it may be seen that Mrs. Zweig feels part of three cultural nations due to her family history as well as her own socialisation. In terms of her life history, each of the three languages has a special meaning for her, each with its own problems. French links her to her parents and thus to the losses early on in her life, Czech to her stepfather, whom she loved very much, while German was a significant factor in her surviving the three-and-a-half years' imprisonment in the concentration camp. After the Shoah, a sense of belonging to German culture is often problematic in terms of a survivor's self-perception. Yet because of Mrs. Zweig's traumatic experience with the Russians, which she found crueller than her "compulsory prostitution" in Theresienstadt, this is not a central theme for her. In the interview she stated her point of view explicitly: *"The Russians were even worse than the Germans."*

Mrs. Zweig then continued to elaborate on her sense of belonging:

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<sup>15</sup> In analyzing the interviews, I specifically reconstruct the effect of the interaction process. It is therefore possible to concentrate here on the structure of the life story and to present key aspects with a view to establishing findings.

<sup>16</sup> The commas used in the transcript indicate short pauses.

*"... and throughout everything, I knew, it was clear to me that I'm really a Jew."*

Here Mrs. Zweig tried to bring together the three components which, in terms of her life history, she had no doubt experienced as connected until her persecution. However, she needed to attempt this synthesis because of the persecution and destruction by the Nazis. Only with her persecution, with her deportation to the concentration camp and the murder of her husband and stepfather was she irrevocably torn from her multicultural, European orientation and seen as just Jewish. At another point in the interview she said:

*"My Christian friends **never** made me feel, that I was different. Only afterwards, then there was the Kristallnacht and so on and so forth and I was always warned from this and that and that. 'Don't open your mouth, and don't talk too much, and nobody needs to know that you are a Jew.' **Then** I felt, - I am different."*

As the reconstruction of her life story shows, her Jewishness was self evidently given to her until the time of her persecution, when, independent of her feeling of belonging, her persecution as a Jew illustrated to her in the cruelest way possible that she was regarded "only" as a Jew. However, the fact that her Jewishness could not be separated from the European cultural background means she repeatedly returns to the statement:

*"Really, we have our own culture, our belief, our own tradition. You can't even say it's just a Jewish culture, we were always linked, to the European, culture as a whole ... so, if you like, we can consider ourselves European, Jews."*

In this way, Mrs. Zweig distances herself from the Ethiopian Jews as well as from the Jews who lived in Arab countries for generations. This is further exemplified in the following remarks:

*"But I insist that I'm a Jew and, no matter what, I was always a Jew and will always remain one, because - you see, I came to this country and the first clash between European culture, the European way of living, the European background,, and this, this oriental background and culture and way of life was then a huge shock for me."*

On the one hand, in this section Mrs. Zweig renounces her Jewishness - she did not come to Israel as a Jew but as a European - and, on the other hand, she simultaneously declares it: Mrs. Zweig experienced Israel as a European, since she decided on aliya as a Jew, i.e., to emigrate to Israel and in this way complete her sense of belonging to the Jewish people. For Mrs. Zweig, the emigration to Israel was an experience in her life history in which, following her designation as a Jew by the Nazis and the traumatic years spent as a Jew in the concentration camp, her sense of belonging became a subject for her too. Her own self-definition of a sense of belonging became relevant for her in her confrontation with an unknown culture. This is then seen in her life story: in the interview, she only talks about her cultural identity in the context of her emigration to Israel. This text structure shows that, for Mrs. Zweig, the question of which cultural circles she belonged to was of no biographical relevance during her childhood and youth. On the other hand, the reconstruction of this specific case shows on a general level how the need to interpret one's sense of belonging arises when experiences of being a stranger become a part of one's life history.



Later in the interview, she described her journey to Israel, her arrival in Haifa, the first time she ate falafel, and how she found everything very strange. She spoke of the difficult living conditions in the beginning, the scorpions, unknown diseases and the heat. What is interesting in this case is that she described her foreign experiences in most detail when referring to the strange food, the falafel. I associate this with a childhood memory of Hannah's that for her symbolizes the experience of her difference from Christian children: although her mother forbade her to eat non-kosher food, Hannah loved eating her school-friends' liver-sausage sandwiches. When her mother found out, Hannah was punished in a physically unforgettable manner: she had to wash her mouth out with soap. Today by eating pork in Israel, she is returning to her childhood preferences.

To sum up, Mrs. Zweig sees her emigration to Israel thus:

*"I tell you, until I found my way around, it was awful, I can't understand it myself now,, why I left Europe and came to this country. But then I say to myself why not?, you always wanted to be a Jew and you always wanted to live in a Jewish country, so you had to do it, had to swallow it as they say, ... you've made your bed, now you have to lie in it,, and I lay in it and now it's worn out (laughing) that's life what're you meant to do?"*

Here it finally becomes clear that Mrs. Zweig's Jewish identity - let us formulate it in terms of action theory - her chosen course through life as a Jew, is drawn from her orientation towards a common country which constitutes part of her Jewish life and biography respectively. This orientation towards Judaism (which was declared each year on Seder evening within the family, which celebrated the festivals)<sup>17</sup> stayed with her after the Shoah, in contrast to her rejection of a life following Jewish law. This allows Mrs. Zweig to recreate a sense of continuity in a part of her life which was riddled with disturbances and losses from an early age onwards. The recreation of continuity is of special importance for the psychic stability of survivors whose former life-lines had been abruptly and irreversibly cut by the persecution (cf. Niederland 1980:229).

Mrs. Zweig lost everyone of significance to her in Europe and her life in Prague was irrevocably destroyed after the Holocaust. She could neither return to marriage nor to a career. What remained was her sense of belonging to the Jewish people, which was not a religious affiliation but the idea of a common country and common history.

So does this now mean that somebody who has followed such a path through life considers him/herself to be Jewish and/or that a sense of belonging to the Jewish people after the Shoah allows a sense of continuity to the past? Let us contrast this case study of Mrs. Zweig with the life story of a woman whose self-definition does not concentrate on Jewishness.

After asking Amalia Teschner to tell me her life story, she began as follows:

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<sup>17</sup> On this evening, the Haggada (the scripture on the exodus from Egypt) is read aloud during the ritual meal. At the end all participants lift their glasses for the last time and wish each other: "Next year in Jerusalem."

*"I belong, to the German-speaking island in, Slovakia."*

Thus Mrs. Teschner (born in 1916), who speaks perfect German, does not introduce herself with "I come from" but with "I belong to". This sense of belonging - formulated in the present tense - shows that she belongs there, even though she no longer lives there. Thus, there are signs of creating continuity from this very first sentence in her autobiographical narration.

The island Mrs. Teschner refers to is an island where German is spoken, surrounded by another ethnic group with a different language within the same country. So is Mrs. Teschner a German or is she merely referring to the language? Let us see how she continued:

*"My father was a teacher at the Jewish, Israeli primary school, which was a German school."*

She introduced her father into the conversation by way of his profession. At this point, one hypothesis can already be formulated: The biographer was in this way explaining why the family lived on this German-language island. Mrs. Teschner continued:

*"But my family really comes from Hungary."*

Here we learn the family's actual nationality. As Mrs. Teschner explains later on, this part of Slovakia belonged to Austro-Hungary and was handed over to Czechoslovakia one year after the state was founded in 1918. Her parents originally came from an area which still belonged to Hungary after 1919. Their relatives continued to live there. Her father however decided to remain in Slovakia after the reorganization of the state. We have to remember that this decision would later have a decisive influence on the persecution of the family since Hungarian Jews were protected from deportations to the extermination camps for a much longer period than Slovakian Jews. At this point, with this third piece of information about the family's Hungarian origin, the family constellation begins to become apparent, a constellation which Mrs. Teschner still hands down today via her sense of belonging. In other words, the experience of discontinuity in the family history in terms of national affiliation is 'healed' by maintaining a sense of ethnic belonging.

Thus the concern here is a Jewish family from Hungary, which belonged to a minority both as Jews and Hungarians within the collective of Germans in Slovakia - a minority itself.<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Teschner continued:

*"My real mother tongue<sup>19</sup>, if our family has any such thing, is Hungarian. But we spoke German and I only learned German right until the end of school and did my school-leaving exam in German. I finished my schooling at a German grammar*

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<sup>18</sup> Approximately 10 % of the population in Mrs. Teschner's home town are Jews.

<sup>19</sup> Underlining indicates stressed speech.

*school in our little town. I then studied at the Slovakian university in Bratislava."*

Thus Mrs. Teschner's pre-university socialisation is markedly German and/or is orientated towards German culture - not uncommon for Jewish families. Her family may have come from Hungary but her education and linguistic socialisation were concentrated on German. Consequently she still mainly speaks German with her brother and sister, who both emigrated to Israel as early as the 30s, although they do repeatedly switch into Hungarian.

Yet Mrs. Teschner does not feel she now belongs to German cultural circles. Unlike Mrs. Zweig she could never talk of an attraction to German culture. For her, who survived the Auschwitz extermination camp and lost her parents, parents-in-law and husband immediately upon arrival in Auschwitz, her past predominant orientation towards German culture is a problem. This is one of the reasons why Mrs. Teschner so vehemently considers herself to be Hungarian these days. In order to distance herself from Germans, the Hungarian side, which was of family relevance prior to the persecution, gains in importance retrospectively. Although Mrs. Teschner never openly described herself as a Hungarian in the four interviews I carried out with her, for me she was a Hungarian by the way she presented herself - especially during the private meetings after the interviews. Thus I did not doubt her answer when I once asked her about Jewish identity: *"What would you say you felt yourself to be, an Israeli, Jew or what?"* She replied without hesitation: *"I'm Hungarian"*.

But why did she not describe herself as an Israeli or Jew? Even if we take into consideration the fact that Hungarian Jews in Slovakia during the period between the World Wars showed nationalistic Hungarian tendencies, as opposed to the Jews in Prague, Mrs. Teschner's self-definition as a Hungarian is still unexpected. She was only socialised in a Hungarian background to a certain extent in Slovakia. Most of her friends were Slovaks or Germans. However all the family's relatives lived in Hungary. It was this very family constellation, the family remaining in the area annexed to the CSSR in 1919, that may have determined this early identification with these ethnic origins and to which Mrs. Teschner still holds tight, even though she has led a life devoted to developing Israel ever since her emigration there in 1949. Although she very much misses the cultural and European part of Tel Aviv, she left Tel Aviv with her second husband - also a doctor - to move to the desert and build up a section of the hospital. Working in the Negev desert means living as a European among mainly Oriental Jews and, furthermore, being responsible for the medical treatment of the Bedouins. Mrs. Teschner also attaches importance to her family being good Israelis. She is proud of the fact that her son and daughter continue to live in Israel despite the difficult living conditions and the constant threat of war and that they are committed to furthering the country in their careers.

So what is the biographical function of Mrs. Teschner's identification with Hungary? In contrast to her Jewishness and German identity, the Hungarian side was not a problem in her life. As she never actually lived in Hungary, she did not experience Hungarian anti-Semitism. The Hungarian side is much more a part of her life due to her second marriage to a Jewish Hungarian, a part which provided her with a continuity to a destroyed past and/or recreated it after the War. Mrs. Teschner's certainty of belonging

was much more completely annihilated by her experiences in Auschwitz than was that of Hannah Zweig. For her, Auschwitz questioned even belonging to mankind. For her, the question of humanity and the human race is far more threatening than the question of belonging to a certain collective. Mrs. Teschner still suffers from the dehumanization and deindividualization she experienced so profoundly at her arrival in Auschwitz. After her inmate number had been tattooed she felt: *"And in this moment one feels,, actually you are no longer yourself,, you have no name,, and you go wherever you are sent to, and,, any, any kind of, any,, future, if there will be a future."* Thus it was the tattooing of her number in Auschwitz which, as she says herself, *"bored so deep into the soul"* and not the cutting of her hair or other humiliating procedures. She continued:

*"I'm fed up with it, the whole time even now, the number, and no name."*

Following her release, Amalia Teschner struggled against committing suicide. Only her medical studies and her employment as a doctor kept her alive. She speaks about a conversation with a friend that took place immediately after the liberation. The friend told her:

*"There are only two possibilities, either you draw a line,, and what happened happened and you begin a new life or you hang yourself.' And then I began to become active again and to take up my studies. I said to myself. I want to continue to study..., because I want to prove to myself, that I can still manage something."*

On the one hand, following the advice of her friend, Mrs. Teschner speaks about the line she should draw and the new life she should start; on the other hand, she expresses how she tried to connect to her past by resuming an earlier development in her biography. She completed her medical studies in Bratislava. Her profession is still central in her life today and so her academic and professional careers are a dominant theme in her total life history. Her profession was that part of her life which Mrs. Teschner could pick up again in 1945 and which at least gave her some feeling of continuity. She did not want to leave Czechoslovakia after 1945 although both she and her husband experienced difficulties in their clinic, being Jewish doctors. It was her second husband who pulled her out of her hopelessness and pushed for the emigration to Israel. Alongside her career, it was this marriage which kept her alive. She shares her Hungarian origins and language with her husband thus she can live out a part of her lost life in Israel. The couple speak Hungarian to each other and many of their friends and acquaintances are Hungarians. Unlike Hannah Zweig, the couple spoke their own native language to their children during the first years of their lives.

### 3. Summary

Both women were multiculturally socialised, both women have led a multicultural life until now, and, above all, both lead a consciously Israeli life. Even if they do not immediately define themselves as Israelis, they identify themselves with the country and are actively involved in its development. Neither of them belongs to those European Jews who, in their own minds, are still living in Europe in the good old days and who hardly speak any Hebrew. Their self-definition of their sense of belonging may be different, but not its function in their lives. In both cases, the definition of cultural affiliation helps them create a sense of continuity to their pasts prior to the persecution. They thus choose a self-definition which already lies within the scope of possibilities of their families. This scope of possibilities is always varied. The reason why Mrs. Zweig

and Mrs. Teschner each chose one possibility and not the other is determined by their biographies and not unalterably imposed upon them during childhood.<sup>20</sup>

If we were to limit ourselves to the level of self-definition, we would learn very little about lived-through experiences. On the basis of self-definition, we would also probably be completely wrong in our prognoses about the lived-through experiences. Without reconstructing the life story, the biographical role of this self-definition in the current-day lives as well as how it is composed in terms of the life history would also remain unexplained. The question must be raised as to how we social scientists can deduce the meaning of a social act if we do not know the history of the individual leading up to it or that of the social system. Social acts may only be understood and explained by analysing the conditions prevailing at their conception and this implies undertaking a biographical analysis.

Better than the analytical application of an identity concept more strongly oriented to the subjects' self-definitions within the framework of the here and now, a theoretical examination based on biography allows the reconstruction of the subject's actions and their effects on the present life. Identity is not based on belonging to a collective, but on belonging to the relevant biographical history, against the backdrop of the family history, embedded as it is in different collectives, in the social world, and in the active choice between different - if limited - possibilities. And this is exactly what we mean by biography.

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<sup>20</sup> While Mrs. Teschner, for example, leads a completely unreligious life, eating meat with cream, as Hungarians like to, her brother, who emigrated to Palestine before the Shoah, is strictly orthodox.

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